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ABSTRACT

This document consists of 11 information sheets on conducting literacy audits for social agencies in Calgary, Alberta (Canada). The literacy audit is a systematic in-house assessment of the accessibility of an agency for low literate adults. The packet begins with five information sheets that provide questions and answers under the following headings: Problem; Solutions; Conducting the Audit; Client Literacy; and Further Information. The questions asked under these headings are, respectively: (1) Is the literacy problem your problem? (2) What can your agency do? (3) How can your agency get the most from the literacy audit? (go to the top, put someone in charge, raise awareness, conduct the audit systematically, do the right thing, and think long term); (4) Does your client have a literacy problem? and (5) Where can you learn more about adult literacy? (five references). The audit worksheets contain questions or statements to be used for agency self-evaluation in the following areas: (1) access; (2) reception area; (3) receptionists--how well do they communicate with clients? (4) forms and print materials used in agencies; (5) agency professionals' performance; and (6) clients' opinions on agencies that serve them. (NLA)

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LITERACY AUDIT

FOR SOCIAL AGENCIES

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Calgary Adult Literacy Awareness Project

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by
Jim Bell and Anne Trussler
Calgary Adult Literacy Awareness Project
1992
Funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Government of Alberta

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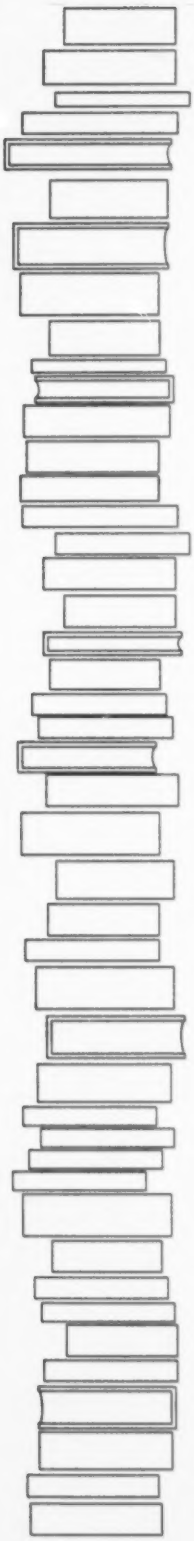


PROBLEM

Is the Literacy Problem Your Problem?

A gap between your clients' poor literacy skills and your agency's literacy demands may mean that you are not communicating with your clients well enough to meet your objectives. The Literacy Audit for Social Agencies will help you systematically check your agency for literacy barriers and thus assess how user-friendly your agency is for low literate adults.

Do many of your clients have significant problems with reading and writing? The answer is probably yes. If your clientele is representative of the general population, 38% of your clients have significant reading problems. Some cannot read (7%), others can read only common words (9%), and some can read materials which are simple and clearly laid out (22%).

However, even more of your clientele will have literacy problems if you serve certain groups. Some groups with well-documented reading and writing problems include senior citizens, Natives, offenders, and people whose first language is not English. The major groups in Adult Basic Education classes are:

- women, with children, who may have cut short their schooling because of family responsibilities
- young adults who may have dropped out of school only to find they needed more education
- retrainers who may be moving from a job where their literacy skills deteriorated to a position where advanced literacy skills are demanded
- the least affluent/least employed who may have spent years in a cycle of undereducation and sporadic employment
- low ability strivers who may have mental or emotional handicaps

Literacy abilities should not be criteria for accessing social agencies. Are the literacy demands of your agency barriers to some clients? Is your agency user-friendly for low literate adults? The Literacy Audit for Social Agencies will help you answer this question.

Please turn over page.

SOLUTIONS

What Can Your Agency Do?

Conduct the literacy audit and make any necessary changes in your agency.

The audit is a systematic, in-house assessment of how user-friendly your agency is for low literate adults. The audit has six parts:

Access

Reception Area

Receptionists

Print

Professionals

Clients

There are also five information sheets:

Problem: Is the Literacy Problem Your Problem?

Solutions: What Can Your Agency Do?

Conducting the Audit: How Can Your Agency Get the Most from the Literacy Audit?

Client Literacy: Does Your Client Have a Literacy Problem?

Further Information: Where Can You Learn More about Adult Literacy?

The self-evaluation and reflection involved in conducting the audit should sensitize you to the literacy needs of many of your clients. But is conducting the literacy audit really worthwhile? It is if your agency makes the changes necessary to close gaps discovered between clients' literacy skills and the agency's literacy demands. Important information about health, safety, rights, and resources is often presented in ways that do not reach the people who need the information the most. You can take down the wall of words by using plain language when using printed material. You can also avoid printed material and look for alternate ways of communicating. If you make the changes, you will

- serve your clients better
- operate more efficiently because there is better communication
- serve a broader range of clients.

Taking the time and energy to conduct the audit is an investment in meeting your objectives.

CONDUCTING THE AUDIT

How Can Your Agency Get the Most from the Literacy Audit?

The dangerous pattern is this: Do the audit; then do nothing. Make sure the audit makes a difference. To increase the chances of constructive change, follow these guidelines for conducting the audit.

1. Go to the top.
Involve the Board of Directors and/or senior management from the start. They must be committed to conducting the literacy audit and to implementing some of the recommended changes. Board and management should examine the agency's mission and objectives to see how literacy is a part of these.

2. Put someone in charge.
Designate a Literacy Coordinator for the agency. This resident literacy "expert" should be interested in literacy and should have some power in the agency. The person can train for the task by reading about literacy, attending literacy conferences, and going to plain language workshops. The Literacy Coordinator's duties might include the following:

- Arrange education sessions.
- Organize the literacy audit.
- Collate and report the results of the audit.
- Coordinate planning and implementing recommendations.
- Answer literacy questions in the agency.
- Coordinate other literacy efforts.

You may want to have a literacy professional act as a consultant for your audit.

3. Raise awareness.
Arrange an education session to help staff examine the need for conducting the audit. The education session should address common misconceptions about literacy and should relate general literacy information to your specifice agency.

Invite a local Adult Basic Education (ABE) or English as a Second Language (ESL) professional to conduct the session. If you do not know of a suitable person, contact your provincial association for adult literacy or your provincial association for teachers of English as a Second Language.

Please turn over page.

Instead of relying on one literacy professional, you may want to invite several people to conduct one or more workshops. Consider the following:

- ABE professional
- ESL professional
- plain language consultant
- low literate client(s)
- Board Member or senior manager
- someone from an agency that has conducted a literacy audit

4. Conduct the literacy audit systematically.
Distribute the appropriate literacy audit sheets to the appropriate people. Every person participating in the audit should receive copies of the five information sheets and whichever of the following audit sheets is/are appropriate: "Access," "Reception Area," "Receptionists," "Print," "Professionals." Also, use the audit sheet "clients" to talk with the people who receive your services.

Involve as many agency people as possible in the literacy audit.

Encourage discussion.

Compile the results by a specific deadline.

Report the results.

5. Do the right thing.
Give all members of the agency an opportunity to participate in planning necessary changes, and then make the changes.

6. Think long term.
Make the literacy audit part of the agency's ongoing planning. Looking for literacy barriers can become an integral part of your agency's operation.

CLIENT LITERACY

Does Your Client Have a Literacy Problem?

In a sense, illiteracy is invisible. You cannot tell from looking at people whether they read poorly or well. Low literate adults also develop many ways of hiding the signs of reading and writing problems. Consequently, it is difficult to tell if a client has a literacy problem. However, the following considerations will help.

Consider whether the person:

- Has completed high school
- Reads extremely slowly and laboriously
- Can summarize for you what has been read
- Answers questions on forms incorrectly
- Can write
- Has serious spelling, grammar, and mechanics problems
- Says he or she has trouble with reading and writing
- Has difficulty speaking English
- Has performed poorly on tests of reading and writing ability
- Uses strategies such as the following to avoid reading and writing:
  - a) forgetting his or her glasses
  - b) not having time to read or write something on the spot
  - c) wanting to take the forms home
  - d) bringing a friend
  - e) becoming angry and storming out
  - f) not showing up for appointments.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Where Can You Learn More about Adult Literacy?

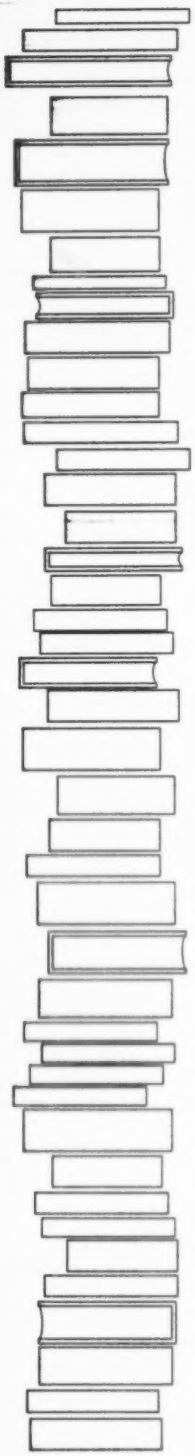
Baldwin, Ruth. (1990). *Clear writing and literacy*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Literacy Coalition. Available from the Ontario Literacy Coalition, 365 Bloor Street East, Toronto, ON M4W 3L4, phone (416) 963-5787.

Calamai, Peter. (1987). *Broken words: Why five million Canadians are illiterate*. N. p.: Southam. Available from Southam Direct Marketing, 12 Nantucket Blvd., Scarborough, ON N1P 4W7, phone (416) 759-4711.

Plain language clear and simple. (1991). Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada. Available from Canada Communication Group - Publishing, Ottawa, ON K1A 0S9.

Statistics Canada. (1991). *Adult literacy in Canada: Results of a national study*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry, Science and Technology. Available from Publication Sales, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, ON K1A 0T6, phone 1-800-267-6677, or from your nearest Statistics Canada office.

Taking down the wall of words, Part I and Part II. (1990) Ottawa, ON: The John Howard Society of Canada. Available from The John Howard Society of Canada, 55 Parkdale Ave., Ottawa, ON K1Y 1E5, phone (613) 728-1865.



ACCESS

This work sheet is divided into two related sections. The first section presents specific statements of good practice and asks you to rank your agency's performance on a five-point scale, 1 being low (or no) and 5 being high (or yes). The second section asks some broad questions to help you pull together your thoughts on the topic and make a general judgment.

	No				*Yes*
1. Our agency de-emphasizes print in promoting its services.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Our agency emphasizes nonprint media (e.g., radio, TV, video, and personal communication) in promoting its services.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Our print materials are easy for marginally literate adults to read and use.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our logo or symbol communicates our service.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Our telephone number is listed under our common-usage name(s).	1	2	3	4	5
6. Our agency is easy for low literate adults to find.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Directions on how to find the agency mention landmarks and bus stops.	1	2	3	4	5
8. The agency name and symbol are clearly displayed on the building.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Clear signs and symbols direct people from the front door to our offices.	1	2	3	4	5

Please turn over page.

In light of the previous questions:

Do we advertise our services so that low literate adults have an equal opportunity of learning about them?

Is our agency easily accessible to low literate adults?

RECEPTION AREA

This work sheet is divided into two related sections. The first section presents specific statements of good practice and asks you to rank your agency's performance on a five-point scale, 1 being low (or no) and 5 being high (or yes). The second section asks some broad questions to help you pull together your thoughts on the topic and make a general judgment.

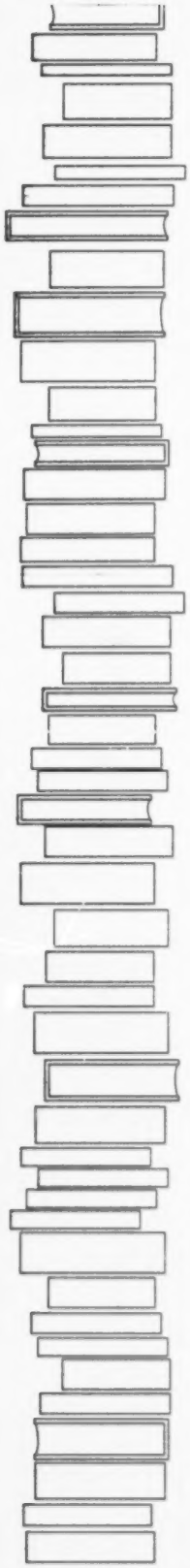
	No				*Yes*
1. The walls and bulletin boards are clear of excess printed material.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The reception area is clearly signed.	1	2	3	4	5
3. The atmosphere is comfortable, making low literate adults feel they can ask for help.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Clients at the reception desk have some privacy.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Audio or video presentations provide important information.	1	2	3	4	5

Please turn over page.

In light of the previous questions:

Is the reception area welcoming?

Does the reception area provide all clients with helpful information?



RECEPTIONISTS

This work sheet is divided into two related sections. The first section presents specific statements of good practice and asks you to rank your agency's performance on a five-point scale, 1 being low (or no) and 5 being high (or yes). The second section asks some broad questions to help you pull together your thoughts on the topic and make a general judgment.

	No				*Yes*
1. I avoid agency jargon when communicating with clients.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I speak in plain English.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I explain things in appropriate detail for each client.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I make eye contact with all clients.	1	2	3	4	5
5. With English as a Second Language (ESL) clients, I speak more slowly.	1	2	3	4	5
6. With ESL clients, I use basic vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5
7. With ESL clients, I use short sentences.	1	2	3	4	5
8. With ESL clients, I avoid idiomatic expressions (e.g., "You'll feel like your old self in a few days.")	1	2	3	4	5
9. With ESL clients, I use the active voice, not the passive (e.g., "Our agency gives that kind of help," not "That kind of help is given by our agency.")	1	2	3	4	5
10. With ESL clients, I avoid raising my voice.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I offer all clients the same assistance so that I avoid selecting possible low literate adults for special—and potentially embarrassing—treatment.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I provide the opportunity for clients to ask additional questions.	1	2	3	4	5

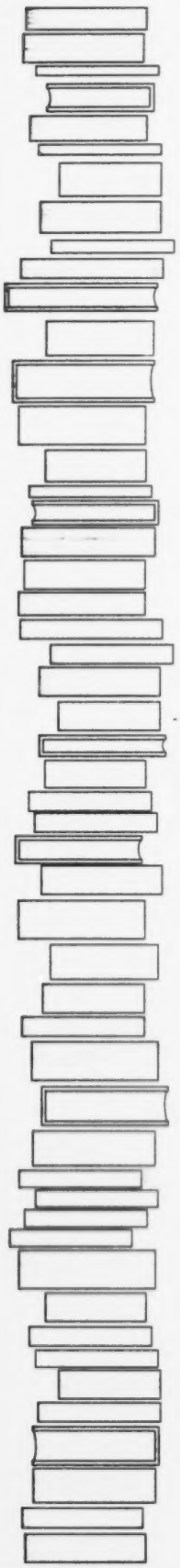
Please turn over page.

In light of the previous questions:

Do we communicate clearly with low literate clients so that they know what to do without having to read complex materials?

Do we speak appropriately to people for whom English is a second language?

Do we treat all clients in a friendly enough manner so that they might feel comfortable asking for additional help?



PRINT

This work sheet is divided into two related sections. The first section presents specific statements of good practice and asks you to rank your agency's performance on a five-point scale, 1 being low (or no) and 5 being high (or yes). The second section asks some broad questions to help you pull together your thoughts on the topic and make a general judgment.

	No				*Yes*
1. All the forms we use are essential.	1	2	3	4	5
2. We ask all clients whether they need help filling out our forms.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Nonprint help (e.g., staff, volunteers, audio tapes, videos) is available for completing forms.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our print materials are written in plain language.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Any graphics or illustrations are clear.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Print materials have ample white space as relief from the print.	1	2	3	4	5
7. If appropriate, agency print materials are available in other languages.	1	2	3	4	5

Please turn over page.

In light of the previous questions:

How easy to read are our print materials?

Do we help our clients deal with print materials, if necessary?

PROFESSIONALS

This work sheet is divided into two related sections. The first section presents specific statements of good practice and asks you to rank your agency's performance on a five-point scale, 1 being low (or no) and 5 being high (or yes). The second section asks some broad questions to help you pull together your thoughts on the topic and make a general judgment.

	No				*Yes*
1. I avoid agency jargon when communicating with clients.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I speak in plain English.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I explain things in appropriate detail for each client.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I make eye contact with all clients.	1	2	3	4	5
5. With English as a Second Language (ESL) clients, I speak more slowly.	1	2	3	4	5
6. With ESL clients, I use basic vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5
7. With ESL clients, I use short sentences.	1	2	3	4	5
8. With ESL clients, I avoid idiomatic expressions (e.g., "You'll feel like your old self in a few days.")	1	2	3	4	5
9. With ESL clients, I use the active voice, not the passive (e.g., "Our agency gives that kind of help," not "That kind of help is given by our agency.")	1	2	3	4	5
10. With ESL clients, I avoid raising my voice.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I avoid selecting possible low literate adults for special—and potentially embarrassing—treatment.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I provide the opportunity for clients to ask additional questions.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I try to discover whether each client has a literacy problem.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I encourage low literate adults to seek help with reading, writing, and/or speaking English.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I am knowledgeable about literacy programs in the area.	1	2	3	4	5

Please turn over page.

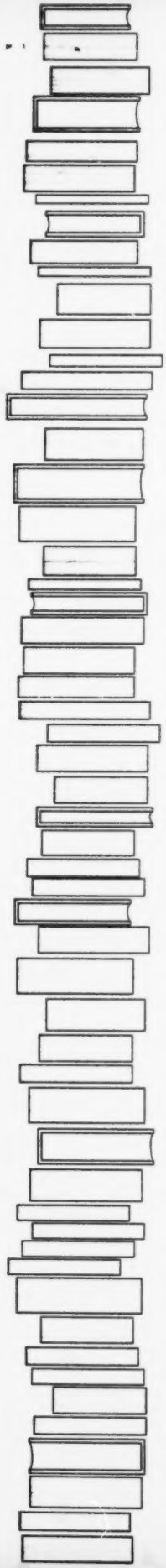
In light of the previous questions:

Do we communicate clearly with low literate clients so that they know what to do without having to read complex materials?

Do we speak appropriately to people for whom English is a second language?

Do we treat all clients in a friendly enough manner so that they might feel comfortable asking for additional help?

Do we encourage our low literate clients to enroll in the appropriate literacy classes or programs?



CLIENTS

Instructions: Talk with some of your clients about the following questions.

1. How did you hear about our agency?

2. Was it difficult to get here the first time?

3. Is the reception area friendly?

4. Did the receptionist explain clearly what to do?

5. Are our forms, pamphlets, and letters easy to understand?

6. Did the professional staff help you?